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ABSTRACT

This Digest summarizes what is known about the successful transition of children with disabilities from infant/toddler services to preschool education. The ideal transition process is defined and characteristics of an ideal process such as meeting individual needs and providing uninterrupted services are listed. Also noted are issues in the transition process such as differences in eligibility processes and philosophical shifts in intervention models. The paper focuses on five strategies which have been demonstrated to be effective: (1) interagency coordination; (2) preparation, information exchange, and training among ending programs, receiving programs, and families; (3) family support; (4) child preparation; and (5) staff training and collaboration. Some findings of the Early Childhood Research Institute on Inclusion are noted concerning families' and professionals' experiences and perceptions during the transition process, their expectations and concerns, and factors that affected or influenced the transition process and outcome. (Contains 11 references.) (DB)

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EARLY TRANSITIONS FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES: TRANSITIONS FROM INFANT/TODDLER SERVICES TO PRESCHOOL EDUCATION

By

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Early Transitions for Children and Families: Transitions from Infant/Toddler Services to Preschool Education

Marci J. Hanson

Transitions for young children can occur at a number of points as the child moves from the hospital to the family's home, from care in the home to infant/toddler early intervention services, from infant/toddler services to preschool education, and from preschool to kindergarten and elementary school. For purposes of this discussion, transitions are identified as "points of change in services and personnel who coordinate and provide services" (Rice &O'Brien, 1990, p. 2).

While all children experience transitions in their early years, children with developmental challenges and their families may experience more frequent and more intense transitions in necessary services. These transitions may be stressful for families. Family concerns during this process are heightened by changes in friendship ties and service delivery systems as the child moves from more home-based and family-focused services to more center-based and child-focused services (Hains, Rosenkoetter, & Fowler, 1991).

This digest focuses on a crucial early transition for children with disabilities: the transition from infant/toddler services (during which the child and family may or may not have participated in early intervention services) to preschool education. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) provides regulation and funding to states for infant/toddler services to children with disabilities from birth through age 2 under Part C and from age 3 through 21 under Part B, so this transition may represent a different funding and regulation authority as well as a move to a different agency or service delivery location.

The ideal transition process is one which is a "carefully planned, outcome-oriented process, initiated by the primary service provider, who establishes and implements a written, multi-agency service plan for each child moving to a new program (McNulty 1989, p.159). Unfortunately, the transition experiences of many families do not meet this ideal.

Successful Transitions

Transitions are crucial times for decision making about children's services. Wolery (1989) suggests that the transition process should ensure service continuity, reduce family disruptions, prepare children for their program placements, and meet legal requirements. Collaboration between professionals and families and the roles of the child's family, the sending and receiving teachers, other personnel, and service agencies are crucial to a successful transition process.

Successful transitions promote "(a) placement decisions that meet individual needs, (b) uninterrupted services, (c) non-confrontational and effective models of advocacy that families can emulate throughout their children's lives (d) avoidance of duplication in assessment and goal planning, and (e) reduced stress for children, families, and service providers" (Shotts, Rosenkoetter, Streufert, & Rosenkoetter, 1994, p. 395-396).

Transition Issues: What Influences the Process?

A substantial body of literature addresses transition processes, although few studies have examined the transition for children from infant/toddler services to preschool education. However, issues have been identified that highlight particular considerations for this transition.

These issues include the shift from one service system or agency to another, differences in eligibility requirements for services, new demands for child participation, differing expectations for child behavior and "readiness," new types and levels of staff involvement and training, and philosophical shifts in intervention models (Fowler, Hains, & Rosenkoetter, 1990; Hains et al., 1988; Shotts et al., 1994).

Strategies: What Are Essential Elements for Success?

Research findings underscore the importance of collaboration as influential and essential in the transition process. Collaboration between professionals, and between families and professionals, may take many forms and may occur at different levels (Rosenkoetter, Hains, & Fowler, 1994).

Strategies must be adapted to address different types of services and systems and meet the needs of the range of children and families served in terms of cultural, linguistic, ethnic, racial, and socio-economic backgrounds. A description of effective strategies identified in the literature follows.

- **Interagency issues and policies.** Since children often receive services from different agencies during transition, interagency coordination and cross agency linkages are crucial. These linkages establish lines of responsibility and coordinate all facets of the process including child-find, referral and assessment, eligibility requirements, Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP)/Individualized Education Program (IEP) processes, and follow-up and evaluation services (Fowler et al., 1990; Rosenkoetter et al., 1994; Rous, Hemmeter, & Schuster, 1994; Shotts et al.,1994). The IFSP must include steps to support the child's transition at age 3. These steps focus on discussions related to future placements, information exchange, and transition procedures. An interagency committee to review and develop policies and procedures can benefit planning (Rous et al., 1994).

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- **Preparation, information exchange, and training between sending programs, receiving programs, and families.** Prior to the decision making and meetings about future placement, all participants (family members and professionals) must have information about the child, family concerns and priorities (Hains et al., 1991; Shotts et al., 1994). The development of a transition plan and an established means of communication between families, sending professionals, and professionals in the receiving program facilitates the transition process (Hains et al., 1991; Rosenkoetter et al., 1994).

- **Family support.** Information should be provided to families in formats that match the needs of the family (written vs. oral, group vs. individual, video), include opportunities for program visitation, and include options for supplemental services (Rous et al., 1994).

- **Child preparation.** Several efforts have focused on assessing and teaching the skills needed by the child in the next environment (Byrd & Rous, 1991; Rous et al., 1994). These skills focus primarily on social-behavioral goals and functional skills for participating in the daily routine of the receiving preschool program. They include learning classroom rules, self-management related to activities such as eating and taking care of one's needs, and communicating one's own needs as well as communicating effectively with adults and peers in the program.

- **Staff training and collaboration.** The training of personnel providing infant/toddler services may differ from those providing preschool services, which necessitates coordination and preparation (Fowler et al., 1990).Transition team training for parents and professionalshelps to ensure more successful transitions (Rous et al., 1994).

Findings of the Early Childhood Research Institute on Inclusion (ECRII)

Recent descriptive research from the Early Childhood Research Institute on Inclusion (ECRII), a five-year multi-university federally funded research project, examined the transition process as children moved from Part C services to Part B services (Hanson, 1998; Hanson, Horn, & Brennan, 1997). The study focused on family choices and decision making and the service delivery opportunities for inclusive placements. Families and professionals (sending and receiving teachers, therapists and other related service personnel, service coordinators) were interviewed and observed during the transition process.

Findings centered on families' and professionals' experiences and perceptions during the transition process, their expectations and concerns, and factors that affected or influenced the transition process and outcome. From the families' perspectives, the shift in service delivery systems (and often agencies) contributed to a challenging process in which they were shifted to new rules, regulations, types of services, and often agencies. Most families expressed expectations and concerns that their children receive quality learning/academic experiences, services for their children's special needs, and opportunities for independence building and social participation in settings with children without disabilities.

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